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ABSTRACT

The only essential criterion for a needs assessment at the school district level is that it be focused on the students. This criterion is integrated into the seven factors that compose a successful needs assessment: (1) prediction of skills needed in the future (what the schools should provide students five or ten years from the present); (2) identification of student characteristics; (3) documentation of activities and success of the current local educational process; (4) deciding how to optimize the operations of the school district, based on the first three factors; (5) implementation; (6) evaluation; and (7) recycling (reassessment of needs, continued modification of programs, and further evaluation). (Author)

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Recycle? Objectives? Nee Feedback? Opinionnaires?

Students? Change? Testing? Instruction? Surveys? Phase I?

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Timeliness? Affective? Processes? Worldwide Needs Assessment? Time?

Criterion Referenced Tests? Activities? Measurement? Westinghouse?

Implementation? Targets? Cognitive? Needs Assessment? Short-Range?

Long-Range? Ought-to-Be? Goal Ranking? Needs Assessment? Models?

Programs? Discrepancies? Procedures? Learners? Participation?

P.D.K.? Attainment? Decision-Making? Statistics? Money? Questionnaires?

Documentation? Management by Objectives? Societal Groups? Attitudes?

Student Characteristics? Responsibility? Inventory? Goals? Educators?

Data Collection? Needs Assessment? Community Members? Analysis?

Priority? C.S.E.? Future Skills? Evaluation? Needs Assessment? Operations?

Inservice Programs? Communication? Psychomotor? Needs Assessment?

Critical Goals? Desirable? Research? Evaluation? Performance? Policies?

Assessment Kits? Prediction? Committees? Program Planning? Proposals?

Needs Assessment? Coordination?

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Needs Assessment

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Introduction

A big item on the education circuit today is the process popularly (or unpopularly) called needs assessment. Mandated by law, demanded by school boards, encouraged by university educators and requested by community groups, needs assessment is being forced into the laps of school administrators and ultimately to classroom teachers. Some have panicked, others have laboriously put the process into motion, while still others continue to do what they had already been doing, merely changing the label to that of needs assessment.

What is the nature of this process that stirs so many groups or people? Is it just another of the fads that seem to show up periodically in education? What does a school district gain by conducting a needs assessment? These and other questions should be answered in hopes that the most benefit can be derived from a potentially rewarding situation.

Definition

The most common interpretation of the word "need" in needs assessment is the discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be." Therefore needs assessment in education may be thought of as the process of assessing or determining the extent of the discrepancies that exist in educational operations as related to student outcomes.

This seemingly simple definition hides much of the impact that accompanies an actual needs assessment. For instance, the phrase "what ought to be" could mean a situation that is "requisite," "desirable" or "useful" -- each quite different in meaning. Also, the word assessment implies determination of "importance," "size," or "value."

What types of questions should educators be trying to answer? Perhaps all questions -- that is, the importance, size and value of the discrepancies that exist in all that is requisite, desirable and useful in education. This presents a major task to say the least. No wonder some school administrators are quaking!

Why do a Needs Assessment?

The most compelling reasons for many school districts are (1) the fact that it may be legislatively mandated and (2) that "everybody else is doing it." By and in themselves these reasons are not going to produce the intended results, however, they may provide the necessary impetus to start. Furthermore, if the needs assessment process is internalized by the local school personnel, there are essentially no limits to the benefits that can be derived. Better planning; increased involvement and communication among different societal groups; better information for decision-making; more meaningful feedback and evaluation; closer coordination; better definition of district, building, classroom and individual goals; and much more could result from a "properly" done needs assessment.

What is a Properly Done Needs Assessment?

Essentially the only criteria for an educational needs assessment is that the focus be oriented toward the student. Generally there are four linking factors that make up a needs assessment. Each of these factors consists of a broad statement that allows enough flexibility for adoption to a local school system. Staying within the following framework, many options are available to the user ranging from complete pre-packaged needs assessment kits to procedures developed entirely within the local district.

Factor I. Prediction of skills needed in the future.

This factor enables a school district to focus on the reasons for their very existence, that is, what is it that the schools should provide the students in order to help them cope not only in the present, but also next year, 5 or 10 years from now. Answering this question gives a direction or target for all activities that follow.

Factor II. Identification of characteristics of local students.

The personnel, the curricular programs and the facilities of a local school district should not only be directed toward future targets, but should also reflect the unique characteristics of the students currently attending the school. Therefore an extremely important input for a needs assessment is the identification and verification of these characteristics. This input may include such information as achievement scores, attitudes, unique skills, aspirations for the future, family backgrounds, follow-up surveys of past students, and other types of relevant data.

Factor III. Documentation of activities and success of the current local educational process.

Another valuable input consists of the documentation of the practices and procedures currently operating in the schools. This input is necessary in order to develop a baseline from which to work -- something that can be added to, deleted or modified. Input of this nature might include program evaluations, trend analyses, scheduling, planning procedures, survey opinionnaires, and other pieces of information that can be documented.

Factor IV. Determination of what has to be eliminated, modified or added to the current local educational process to coordinate Factors I, II, and III.

This factor is the heart of needs assessment. Taking into account the goals or predicted future skills, the student characteristics, and the current

operating procedures, a plan of action has to be developed in order to try to optimize the operations of the school district. One method of tying these factors together at this stage is for the classroom teachers to personalize each district-wide goal in terms of classroom objectives, activities and evaluation. Figure 1 illustrates a useful format for classroom application.

Goal or Predicted Skill_____

	Cognitive Questions	Psychomotor Questions	Affective Questions
Classroom Objective Statements	What do I want my students to know because of this goal?	Is there a psychomotor skill associated with this goal?	What attitudes should students have in learning and in applying this goal?
Classroom Evaluation	How can I tell the difference between successful and unsuccessful students?	How can the success of the psychomotor skills be observed?	How can I make subjective attitude evaluation less subject to individual whim and prejudice?
Methods and Materials	What processes and materials have worked in getting this goal across to the unique students in my classroom?	What processes and materials have worked in developing psychomotor skills needed for meeting this goal?	What can my students and I do together to develop the give-and-take necessary to foster attitudes needed in accomplishing this goal?
Needed Resources	What resources are needed in my classroom to better accomplish this goal?		

Figure 1 Questions that can be used to correlate goals, objectives, evaluation and resources in the classroom.

By thoroughly answering the questions contained in Figure 1, teachers and administrators will be able to more closely relate to district goals and will also begin to identify and document curricular discrepancies.

What happens after the needs assessment is completed?

To stop at this point would be analogous to putting millions of dollars into research and never using its benefits. Similarly, in needs assessment, steps have to be taken beyond the identification of needs if it is to be of value to the school district. The following three factors bring closure to the initial cycle of a needs assessment.

Factor V. Implementation.

Once decisions are made to modify existing programs a plan of action for implementation should be established. If the previous four factors of needs assessment have been well documented and analyzed, then implementation should be a relatively smooth process. The decisions have already been made, what remains is putting the plan into action. Some targets will be immediate and may be achieved within a few months. Other implementation phases may be spread over several years.

Inservice programs, group discussions, planning sessions, establishing timelines, PERT networks, and many other processes could assist the implementation factor of needs assessment.

Factor VI. Evaluation.

Needs assessment and the implementation of the changes decided upon would produce little visible impact without an evaluation of success of the various activities. Certain targets have been established and methods developed in hopes of moving the students closer to the actual achievement

of these targets. Ideally, the evaluation should look at the appropriateness of the targets and the success of the methods used to achieve these targets.

Factor VII. Beyond Needs Assessment (Recycling).

The completion of the needs assessment model represents the beginning of a meaningful on-going process if provisions for recycling are included. Only through the recycling process -- reassessment of needs, continued modification of programs, and further evaluation -- will the educational process continue to grow, improve, and provide meaningful experiences for the learner.

Comparison of Three Models

Seven factors have been identified as being integral parts of a needs assessment: (1) future targets; (2) student characteristics; (3) current processes; (4) change needed; (5) implementation; (6) evaluation; and (7) recycling. In Table 1 three commercial needs assessment models are compared on each of these seven factors. The Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) Model was originally developed at Chico State College in California under a Title III ESEA Grant. The Center for the Study of Evaluation based at UCLA developed the CSE Model. The third model used in the comparison is the model produced by the Westinghouse Learning Corporation (WLC).

The three models were chosen because of their established popularity and the ready availability of "kits" to assist in conducting a needs assessment.

Table 1
Comparison of Needs Assessment Models

FACTORS	PDK	CSE	WLC
I. Prediction of skills needed by people in the future.	18 all-encompassing goals are provided as part of the model. The district may change, add, or delete goals if desired. A committee of 60-80 community members determine the relative importance of the goals through a forced-choice technique.	106 elementary school goals derived from 41 broad categories are provided as part of the model. Three alternative methods are suggested for determining the relative importance of the goals.	50 general goals are provided with the model or the district may input their own. Different societal groups rate each goal in terms of importance, responsibility and attainment.
II. Identification of characteristics of local students.	Does not formally look at student characteristics.	Most goals have suggested measurement instruments associated with them that allow gathering quantitative data on achievement and attitudes of the student.	Does not formally look at student characteristics.
III. Documentation of activities and success of current local educational process.	At a second meeting the committee members are asked to rate the goals to determine how well the school is meeting each goal.	Suggested measurement instruments associated with the goal allow gathering data for group comparisons against national norms.	Goals are rated in terms of how well the schools are meeting each goal (attainment).
IV. Determination of what has to be eliminated, modified, or added to the current local educational process in order to coordinate factors I, II and III.	Mean scores for each goal provide educators with a basis for deciding whether to revise existing programs or develop new ones. Scores for the different societal groups are compared to obtain the degree of agreement or disagreement. The goals that receive a high importance/low attainment rating are considered to be most critical.	With the use of a weighting system goals are ranked in terms of the current performance level, the average importance ratings and the probability of improving student performance.	A critical value for priority ranking is determined by a combination of the average ratings of importance (I), responsibility (R) and attainment (A) variables. High I, high R and low A determines goals with the highest priority.
V. Implementation	Programmed course for the writing of performance objectives for current programs of instruction related to the goals. These identify what the learner is to do, how it is to be done and how well the learner is to perform. Program objectives are then developed.	Once the goal areas are ranked in terms of priority value, it is suggested to begin planning the neccessary revisions of the instructional program.	Provides detailed computer analysis of responses by societal groups and by different combinations of variables. Suggests that district personnel analyze, interpret and report data to various publics.
VI. Evaluation	Through measurable performance objectives and implementation of an Educational Planning Model.	It is recommended that a program planning evaluation be conducted to specify the particular type of new instructional programs that will be implemented.	Not formally addressed.
VII. Beyond needs assessment (recycling)	An Administrator's Planning Model is provided for future application and management of needs assessment findings.	Describes a process for communicating results to various interested groups.	Follow up procedures are determined by the local districts.

Design Your Own Process

Perhaps the best and the most meaningful approach would be for the school district to design a needs assessment process that would be unique to its own community. This could be accomplished through a volunteer steering committee composed of interested community members, educators and students. The time and work spent on the project would be considerable but the benefits should far outweigh the cost.

A combination of original ideas, advice from other districts and input from reviews of commercial needs assessment models, in all probability, would produce a better package than could be purchased. This method has an exceeeent chance of eliciting genuine involvement and a local school pride among the different groups of people participating. A further benefit extending beyond the needs assessment activities consists of the increased openness and communication among these same participating groups. This alone should be enough reason for involving many different segments of the population.

It is also reasonable to expect that the implementation, evaluation and recycling factors would be received better if the entire process was locally designed with input coming from many sources.

Designing a needs assessment does not mean developing an entire system from nothing. What the needs assessment process does offer is a coordination of efforts and a "putting together" of many isolated parts. This enables the district to get a global picture of the direction that their schools are taking and then be able to exercise some control over it according to the wishes of their constituents.

Having seen a general framework for needs assessment and a brief comparison of the three models it is easy to identify operations already occurring in the schools that can be incorporated into needs assessment. Figure 2 lists some of these operations in conjunction with the seven factors. Through a planning process, this chart could be used as an aid in deciding which needs assessment factors could be associated with each of the operations. For instance, as marked on the chart, achievement testing could be associated with student characteristics (Factor II) and evaluation (Factor VI).

Conclusion

It should be realized that there is not a prescribed plan to follow that will guarantee a successful needs assessment for a particular school district. However, with careful planning, serious intentions, and a commitment of resources, a needs assessment can produce extremely worthwhile results. Perhaps the most valuable outcomes are: (1) the communication that it encourages among educators, community members, and students; and (2) the identification of what is occurring in the schools which, in turn, identifies the gaps in educational outcomes and processes. Without the formal procedures associated with needs assessment, the coordination and motivation to accomplish these ends would be missing.

Operations That Could Be Applied To Needs Assessment	FACTORS	I. Prediction of Skills	II. Student Characteristics	III. Current Processes	IV. Modifications	V. Implementation	VI. Evaluation	VII. Recycle
1. Achievement	1.		X				X	
2. Aptitude testing	2.							
3. Attitude surveys	3.							
4. Management by objectives	4.							
5. Lesson plans	5.							
6. Book reordering process	6.							
7. Inservice programs	7.							
8. Contracting for grades	8.							
9. Parent-teacher conferences	9.							
10. Teacher-student conferences	10.							
11. Board meetings	11.							
12. PTA meetings	[illegible]							
13. Classroom behavioral objectives	[illegible]							
14. Specialized testing	14.							
15. Criterion-referenced testing	15.							
16. Roundtable discussions	16.							
17. Goal setting	17.							
18. Requisitioning process	18.							
19. Teacher evaluation	19.							
20. Administrator evaluation	20.							
21. Student council meetings	21.							
22. Homeroom meetings	22.							
23. Research reports	23.							
24. Educational journals	24.							
25. Cumulative records	25.							
26. Department meeting	26.							
27. Scheduling	27.							
28. Opinionnaires	28.							
29. Trend analyses	29.							
30. Timelines	30.							
31. Others	31.							

FIGURE 2: Needs Assessment Planning Worksheet

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